Reviews of the **Snakepit: A Novel** by Moses Isegawa

Brialelis

This superb novel of the final days of Idi Amin's despotic regime in Uganda captures the inhumanity of absolute power in horrifying detail. Bat Katanga, a graduate of Cambridge, returns to his homeland and a job at the Ministry of Power and Communication to seek his fortune. The man who hires him, General Bazooka, has done so to undo him, for Bazooka is sensitive about his own lack of education as well as Bat's privileged southern roots and wants to see Bat - and the part of Uganda he represents - to fail. Bat, of course, has no clue; he is more interested in the expensive house and XJ10 that await him. Unfortunately for Bat, Bazooka is as brutal as Bat is naive. When a third man, a white man named Ashes becomes Marshal Amin's confidante, Bat becomes a pawn in a battle of power-grubbing one-upmanship that puts everything he values in jeopardy. As author Isegawa takes the reader into the minds of these men and their lovers, family, and those who surround them, a full, unsettling picture of tyranny emerges. In this country ruled by murder and revenge, no one is safe. Moses Isegawa writes with stunning clarity and force, faltering only slightly at the end with scenes
that would be dramatic in any other novel but which are anticlimactic given what has occurred
before. His most amazing achievement is the descent into the minds of brutes to make them
understandable even if they are wholly despicable. The weaving of these multiple stories - Bat's,
Bazooka's, and others - is seamless, as everything points toward the fall of Idi Amin's hedonistic and
unforgiving regime.
I cannot recommend this novel highly enough. Its bold look at a country ruled by brutality adds a
surprisingly human dimension to outright inhumanity. Readers of Nuruddin Farah's \textit{LINKS}, which
details an intellectual in the midst of Somalia's civil war, will find many similarities, although the two
novels belong distinctively to their respective authors and homelands.

\textbf{Wrathshaper}

The modern history of the region now known as Uganda is utterly dominated by the bizarre and
terrifying rule of that most clownish of despots, Idi Amin. In this, his second novel, Isegawa attempts
to explore the notion of individual responsibility under such a regime. The main protagonist in this
story is recent Cambridge graduate Bat Katanga, a math whiz who returns to his native country
around 1973, just after Amin has kicked out the many Indians who lived there. Seeing opportunity in
the misfortune of these others, Bat manages to land a high position in the MInistry of Power and
Communication. The other primary player in the story is Bat's patron, General "Bazooka", who is cut
of an altogether different cloth. One of the highly uneducated army officers from the South who
stormed the palace in the 1971 Amin-led coup that removed Prime Minister Milton Obote, the
General is an established member of the dictator's inner circle.

The duo's stories, and that of many members of their two families (and not a few other people)
provide plenty of material for Isegawa to paint a very grim portrait of Uganda under Amin. Arbitrary
violence, Caligulan decadence, and thoroughly pervasive corruption started at the very top and
filtered through the entire ruling structure. The hollowness of civic institutions and the proliferation
of guns led to an utter breakdown in civil society, which in turn led to cycles of revenge. As if this
wasn't enough, an increasingly cocaine-addicted Amin relied more heavily on his two strange
advisors: the renown astrologer Dr. Ali ($10,000 session) and the cunning Englishman Robert Ashes
(modeled after the real-life adventurer Bob Astles, who became Amin's confidante). While all this
certainly makes great material for a writer, the novel suffers from several flaws.

One of these is Isegawa's decision to blend fact and fiction to ill effect. It's not clear why he's
created this character of Ashes, when the real-life Astles was such a strange story unto himself.
Similarly, Idi Amin's real antics were so outlandish that there's no need for Isegawa to have invented
new ones, such as the notion that Amin made several movies in Hollywood where he starred as
Mussolini, or that he released a banknote showing him using Europe as a cesspit. A second, and
more major flaw, is Isegawa's inability to stay in once place or with one character for very long. The
book has no rhythm or pace whatsoever, lurching from scene to scene and character to character in
its attempt to paint a broad picture. (A more cohesive fictional examination of Amin's rule is Giles
Foden's \textit{"The Last King of Scotland".}) Finally, the book is rather confusing when it comes to who has
the ability to do what. For example, sometimes General Bazooka can perpetrate the most heinous
outrages, and other times not. It's never clear why Ashes is considered untouchable some of the
time, and not others.

In the end, these flaws don't obscure the book's true theme, which is an exploration of how people
respond to despotism and brutality. Although they are carefully constructed to come from opposite
backgrounds, Isegawa seems to be saying that both the General and Bat are complicit in the evil
regime. In other words, while the violent thug is easily recognizable as evil, the intellectual whose
"victimless" work supports the regime is perhaps equally evil. And naturally, in the end, it is the
innocent who suffer most of all.
This is my first book by this author and I happened to pick it out at my local library. It is basically a story about government and bureaucratic corruption. Being a fellow african, like the author, I can only agree that such a story can only be told authentically from first hand experience. I originally come from a country that has known power-crazy, bloodthirsty military leaders and still knows dire corruption.

This writer's rendition of the bloody and dirty politics of the self-proclaimed Marshall Idi Amin's regime is all too familiar and is written excellently. I also like the book's paper type.

However, that is the only strength of the book. Everything else seems fake and contrived. General Bazooka's hatred of Bat is totally unexplained. I did not buy Bat's imprisonment. He wasn't even tortured at first. It's like the writer remembered at the last minute that political prisoners in Africa arent handled with kid gloves and then decided to make the rest of Bat's prison stay unpleasant, the English MP friend was unrealistically handy to facilitate Bat's release, the courthouse antics of Victoria struck me as clownish, foolish and unreal. I also didnt feel any genuine affection for Bat and Babit as a couple and the description of their trip to England was hollow. Also, Bat's daughter was never mentioned again. The entire plot was a mess, the ending glossed over.

On a whole it was like a bad version of a good Frederick Forsythe book, with a Ugandan flavour.

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